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Vanunu Deserves Our Thanks
by Daniel Ellsberg

Nineteen years ago, Mordechai Vanunu, a technician at the secret nuclear weapons production facility at Dimona in Israel, did something that he was right to do, something that others with his knowledge of Israel's nuclear activities and their implications for Israeli security and democracy and for world order should have done earlier, or later. He revealed to his fellow citizens and the world truths about these activities that had long been wrongly concealed and denied by his government.

What he revealed was not merely that Israel was a nuclear weapons state; that had been known for more than a decade on the basis of widely publicized leaks in the U.S. about official American intelligence estimates to this effect. Vanunu's photographs and interviews with the London Sunday Times revealed that Americans and all others had substantially underestimated the pace and scale of the Israel's secret and uninspected production of nuclear materials and warheads, especially since the early '70s. New estimates on the basis of his revelations put the Israeli arsenal in 1986 at some 200 warheads (rather than 20), making it the third or possibly fourth largest nuclear power, ahead of Britain and probably ahead of France. After 19 more years of production, that ranking remains valid, with Israel probably possessing closer to 400 weapons.

Did not Israelis, citizens of a democracy, and other nations of the world deserve to know this? Was not his example of truth-telling, at great personal risk, to be thanked and emulated? For a generation, the nuclear scientist Joseph Rotblat, a founder of the Pugwash Movement for which he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, has argued that the confidence required in the inspection and enforcement agreements on nuclear disarmament could and must rest in part on "societal verification": the courage and conscience of scientists, technicians, and officials who could reveal to inspectors activities violating those agreements. Unhappily, the last 35 years since the NPT went into effect have not seen many examples of such initiative, other than that of Mordechai Vanunu. Yet the potential value of such revelations, by someone willing, like Vanunu, to risk the heaviest personal costs, is ever more clear.

Imagine, for example, if an Indian citizen aware of India's secret preparations for nuclear testing and of the disastrous impact this would foreseeably have on regional and world security had made this knowledge unequivocally public in time for world opinion to come to bear to avert that tragic error and the Pakistani testing it was sure to provoke. The result for that person could well have been a long prison sentence, as it was for Vanunu; yet surely such an act would deserve a Nobel Peace Prize, for which Rotblat – using his prerogative as a Nobel Laureate – has nominated Mordechai Vanunu repeatedly.

Now, a year after serving his full sentence of 18 years – nearly 12 of them spent in solitary confinement in a two-by-three meter cell – Vanunu is under indictment and faces a return to prison for violating restrictions on his freedom of speech that clearly violate his fundamental human rights. He will continue to speak out in favor of a nuclear-free-zone in the Middle East and the global abolition of nuclear weapons, telling whatever he knows that supports these objectives. It is absurd to maintain, as the head of Israel's security system does, that revelation of any further details he learned from his access in Dimona 19 years ago could undermine Israeli national security, when no one has been able to identify any damage whatever to Israeli security in the years since his revelations in 1986. Rather, the prohibitions against his speaking to foreigners and foreign journalists on any matters, or to his fellow citizens on nuclear matters, are clearly intended to extend his punishment in prison for unauthorized truth-telling for an indefinite period.

The deterrent message to other potential Vanunus – either in Israel or elsewhere – could not be more clear. In a world where more Vanunus are desperately needed – above all, in my own country, the United States, and other nuclear weapons states violating their Article VI obligations – is this a message that the rest of the world should tolerate to be sent unchallenged? In the interest of vital transparency and future societal verification, there should be international protest of Vanunu's new indictment and of the restrictions on his speech and travel.

It is time for the rest of the world to join Mordechai Vanunu in demanding that Israel acknowledge its status as a nuclear weapons state with a large and growing arsenal, and in demanding that ALL

the nuclear weapons states – including Israel, India, and Pakistan, but above all the U.S. and Russia – negotiate concrete steps on a definite timetable toward the global, inspected abolition of nuclear weapons.

I feel compelled to add a personal note. In the early 1960s, as a consultant to the Pentagon on nuclear command and control and nuclear war plans, I was aware that the recent characterization (in the latest issue of Foreign Policy) by Robert S. McNamara of our current nuclear policies was just as valid then: "Immoral, illegal, militarily unnecessary, and dreadfully dangerous." That was demonstrated in classified documents I was reading, and in some I was writing.

I regret profoundly that I did not reveal those documents to my fellow Americans and the world at that time, though I would have gone to prison for it, like Mordechai Vanunu. But I did not have his example of courageous truth-telling then to awaken me to that responsibility. It is my hope that people and governments will press the government of Israel now to free Vanunu to speak throughout the world as a prophet of nuclear abolition.

To register protest over Vanunu's indictment, or to show support for him, coordinate through: Frederick Heffermehl.